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Hall of Fame Denial

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This past Tuesday the U.S. Justice Department announced that it was dropping the obstruction of justice case against Barry Bonds. He had been charged with perjury and obstruction of justice in 2007 for testifying to a grand jury that he had never knowingly used anabolic steroids or human growth hormone, Bonds' testimony was given to the grand jury in 2003 as part of a federal investigation into steroid use by athletes popularly known as the BALCO case. Estimates of the cost of this failed pursuit of Bonds run upwards of \$100M.

On Sunday four players will be inducted into The Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York, where Abner Doubleday did not invent baseball. The four players are all more than deserving of the honor. Three are pitchers, Randy Johnson, Pedro Martinez, and John Smoltz, all elected in their first year of eligibility. The fourth is Craig Biggio elected in his third year of eligibility having missed election last year by two votes.

Election to the Hall of Fame is not easy to achieve, while excuses for not electing someone doesn't seem to be a problem. Over the last few years the factor that seems to be most prevalent in denying election is the use of Performance Enhancing Drugs or more frequently the suspected use of PEDs. Mark McGwire, Barry Bonds, and Roger Clemens are probably the best known players who have failed election on these grounds.

They are not the only ones.

A number of players have been denied entry into Cooperstown based on suspicion and rumor that they may have used some form of PEDs. Craig Biggio's wait until the third year for election may have been due to rumors and suspicions about him, while Mike Piazza falling just short of election this year may also have been due to such suspicions. There is absolutely no need for proof of use. A totally clean record on testing does not matter to some voters. Rumor or suspicion is enough.

On the other hand it is likely that some of those voters who vote against certain candidates on the basis of rumor, never bothered to report on these rumors as members of the

working press. This seems at best inconsistent and not a legitimate standard of proof.

If suspicion is enough to deny entry into the Hall why have some under suspicion been elected? In the last few weeks, John Holway, a baseball historian, has raised the issue of suspicion in reference to players in the Hall of Fame. One factor that is often cited as suspect is performance at a peak level late in a baseball career. It is argued that there is a career cycle starting with growth of performance, peak performance, and then decline. Also an outlier year of exceptional performance raises suspicion.

Holway has examined the career patterns and the numbers of several Hall of Fame members and other players held in high regard. Some very big names appear on his list of players whose achievements accelerated with age. Many of them achieved peak performance in the final years of their long careers, often beyond the age of forty. Among those names are Nolan Ryan and two of this year's inductees, Pedro Martinez and Randy Johnson. Among hitters in the Hall, Holway finds the numbers suspicious for Tony Gwynn, Hank Aaron, Carlton Fisk, and from this year's inductees Craig Biggio.

I do not know if any of these players used PEDs, nor do I personally care. That is not the point. The point that Holway and others have raised is that suspicion surrounds many players in the Hall whose use of PEDs was never questioned. Why? Could it be that they are seen as "good guys," liked by the working press, and portrayed as heroes on the sports pages and beyond?

Another issue was raised a year ago when Tony LaRussa, Joe Torre, and Bobby Cox were inducted into the Hall of Fame. These managers oversaw teams during what is now called the steroid era in baseball. How could these managers not know what was happening in the game, and for that matter what of the front office people, league officials, and the Commissioner? If the enablers are in the Hall, and if the administrators of the game ignored the problem, why should only a "select" group of players face rejection?

Aside from these issues there is a range of questions concerning the impact of PEDs on the game. Where is the evidence that PEDs actually impact the ability to hit a baseball? What evidence is there that PEDs increase the

speed and accuracy with which someone can throw a baseball? Beyond anecdotal evidence is there much to go on?

If in fact PEDs do enhance performance what is the sum total of that impact when both pitcher and batter are using PEDs? Do they cancel each other out? Do PEDs contribute to foot speed making fielders more effective or causing an increase in infield hits and stolen bases? There is surprisingly little discussion of these factors and their impact.

I suspect that serious examination of PEDs and their impact on baseball is simply too complex a topic to broach. It is much easier and simpler to deal in stereotypes, common unproven assumptions, superficial analysis, petty jealousy, and the settlement of grudges.

Welcome to Cooperstown, where reality is not an issue and Abner Doubleday did not invent baseball.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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